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ABSTRACT

Research on adult literacy suggests that some formidable problems lie ahead as efforts continue toward ensuring that every adult in the United States is literate and possesses skills necessary for economic competitiveness and citizenship. Among the difficulties facing existing approaches are three interrelated issues. First, current programs serve only a small percentage of those considered needing improved literacy skills. Second, literacy development appears to be a slow process for participants. Third, retention of the literacy skills and knowledge developed is uncertain. One way to begin thinking about new programmatic approaches to literacy development is to broaden the basic concept of literacy and view it as an attribute of individuals and the environments and contexts in which they live and work. Literacy programs can be designed to affect both the individual through instruction and the environment in which the learner uses literacy. This broadened notion of literacy programming carries with it an expanded sense of program participation and outcomes. Program participation includes engagement in formally organized instructional activities and literacy activities in targeted environments. Program outcomes include proficiencies at performing various literacy activities in targeted environments. Such programs may be readily developed in the workplace or in more traditional formats and settings. (Contains 12 references.) (YLB)

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Programming Adult Literacy: Developing Individuals and Contexts

By STEPHEN REDER

As efforts continue towards Goal 5 of *America 2000*— assuring that every adult in the United States be literate and possess skills necessary for economic competitiveness and citizenship— research on adult literacy suggests that some formidable problems lie ahead and that new programmatic options need to be considered. Among the difficulties facing existing approaches are three interrelated issues.

First, current programs serve only a small percentage of those deemed in need of improved literacy skills (Mickulecky, 1989; Pugsley, 1990). Estimates of the percentage of those in need who are served each year range from 3–7%, depending on how the target population is defined and which programs are included in the service counts (Sticht, 1988). Although many more might participate in adult literacy education if programs were more accessible and learners had fewer logistical problems (e.g., childcare, transportation), large numbers of nonparticipants would likely *never* participate in current types of programs even if they were expanded and logistical barriers were eliminated. Studies of nonparticipants suggest that such factors as the lack of perceived need for improved literacy, unfavorable perceptions of the time and effort required to develop literacy, and a strong dislike for the school-like design of most adult literacy programs keep many from ever participating (Beder, 1990).

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Second, literacy development appears to be a slow process for those who do participate. Longitudinal data reported by programs tracking participants' progress over time indicate that 50-100 class hours are typically needed for adult participants to advance the equivalent of a grade level in proficiency. Since many participants have goals entailing gains of several grade levels, hundreds of hours may be involved. For most adult learners, of course, such time must be accumulated in small increments (typically several hours per week), given their work, family and other responsibilities. This might require several evenings a week for multiple years. Data reported from diverse programs indicate, however, that literacy development

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appears to slow down after the first year or so among participants who stay in programs for multiple years (Sticht, 1992). Although such data may be problematic to interpret, they do highlight the need for other paths to sustained development.

Third, the *retention* of the literacy skills and knowledge that adults develop through program participation is uncertain. There is good reason to suspect that if skills and knowledge gained are not subsequently used in everyday activities, they may diminish over time (Simmons, 1976; Wagner, et al., 1989). NCAL's project on skill retention will provide a better basis for understanding the factors involved in such literacy retention. For the time being, however, the possibility that the post-instructional environment affects the reten-tion (if not the continuing development) of literacy must be seriously entertained.

Providing additional resources to improve and expand existing types of programs would ameliorate some, but not all, of these problems. Literacy development would remain a slow and time-consuming process. Despite overall increases in the numbers participating, many current nonparticipants would likely continue their nonparticipation, even if expanded programs were more accessible. And the retention of learning gains would still be uncertain after program completion. To address some of these issues, new programmatic approaches may be needed, rather than mere expansion of existing approaches.

Literacy development may be closely associated with the individual's engagement in literacy activities wherever they occur, not just in instructional contexts.

One way to begin thinking about new approaches to literacy development is to broaden our basic concept of literacy. Rather than viewing literacy as an attribute of individuals, it can be seen as an attribute of individuals and the environments and contexts in which they live and work. Literacy development, for example, may be closely associated with the individual's engagement in literacy activities wherever they occur, not just in instructional contexts (Reder, in press). Just as literacy behaviors emerge in young children prior to schooling (Clay, 1966), there is considerable anecdotal evidence of literacy development in adults outside of formal instructional contexts (Reder & Green, 1985).

New program designs can come from recognition that adult literacy development may be driven by learner engagement in literacy activities both inside and outside of formally organized instruction.

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We can design literacy programs which impact both the individual (through instruction) and the extra-instructional environment in which the learner uses literacy. For example, workplace literacy programs could be designed in terms of an instructional component and an environmental component. The environmental component might involve systematic changes in the workplace which draw out, engage, and stimulate the further development of the skills and knowledge taught in the instructional component. Recent research on creativity in the workplace has found that creativity emerges and thrives in work settings which draw out and reinforce those behaviors (Poirier, 1992). We need to see literacy at work in a similar way. As adult literacy educators, we must begin to understand and then help put into place work environments that stimulate, reinforce, and engage literacy development and use.

This broadened notion of literacy programming, of course, carries with it an expanded sense of program participation and outcomes. Program participation is broadened to include engagement in both formally organized instructional activities and literacy activities in targeted environments. Program outcomes include proficiencies at performing various literacy activities in the targeted environments (see Fingeret & Danin, 1991, for an example of using broad measures of literacy to evaluate program impact). By co-developing the individual and the environment in this way, programs can address the aforementioned problems of nonparticipation and retention with fresh new perspectives on designing relationships between the environments of instruction and application.

Workplace literacy programs could be designed in terms of an instructional component and an environmental component.

The workplace is a setting in which such programs may be readily developed because adult learners share an important literacy environment. But such programs may also be developed for literacy education in more traditional formats and settings. NCAL's study of participation (described in the Fall 1991 issue of *NCAL Connections*) is following the literacy participation and development of adults over a period of several years as they encounter rapidly changing environmental demands for literacy. Preliminary data suggest that programmatic approaches that attempt to impact the ways which adults apply new literacy skills in their everyday lives have a major impact on program participation and outcomes. Individuals who go through a life- and career-planning process (in which they envision and articulate post-instructional applications for applying new basic skills) before taking basic skills classes are reported by instructors to have much higher rates of participation and learning in subsequent adult basic education classes than students who do not go through this instructional-environmental linking process. Although it will take some time to gather conclusive data, these early reports are suggestive of the contribution which new programmatic approaches may make.

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